

REVIEWS

1) The Latest 7 Magazine

Seven Studies in Salesmanship

Posted in Latest 7, Reviews, Theatre, Under Review, Under Review

Presented as part of the £5fringe, Seven Studies in Salesmanship comprised seven comic vignette's exploring various aspects of the dubious business of convincing others to buy 'product'. The sparse set and simple lighting were brought to life by bright, hilarious characterisations; the acting was superb all-round. My favourite sketch was 'Spaced Out', a perfect example of the utterly exasperating wind-up that a shopping experience can be, when you just want to give your money, but the seller leads you down a never-ending path of offers, deals and decisions. My most enjoyable belly laugh was elicited by Dave Mountfield giving the 'hard sell' as a Yank salesman who launched into an outrageous and exhilarating rant. The audience loved the performance throughout. I noticed the men in the audience seemed to find 'Damage Limitation: About You' particularly funny; Jenny Rowe was most amusing as the wounded '(girl) friend' of a rogue playwright who was trying to flog her the idea that his latest play did not contain all the intimate details of their relationship.

This was a fun examination of the dark arts of sales-personship although it touched on some painful truths, illustrated by references to exploitation of world-suffering for individual gain and the developing problem of the market worming its way into personal lives and infringing privacy conventions. Seven Studies has proven to be another triumph for writing duo Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon.

The Lord Nelson is a lovely, homely venue; everything about the front of house was good natured and hospitable. A great evening. Sold!

The Lord Nelson, 19 May 2013

Rating:

Fleur Shorthouse

2) FringeGuru

Seven Studies in Salesmanship

Published on Sunday, 19 May 2013

The Lord Nelson (venue website)

Theatre

19 May, 8:00pm - 9:45pm

Reviewed by Richard Stamp

. Part of the Five Pound Fringe. Tickets not available from the Brighton Fringe box office. Buy on the door or visit www.brighton5poundfringe.com

There's not much left at the Fringe which can draw a gasp of shock from this jaded, world-weary reviewer. But in Joseph Nixon and Brian Mitchell's hilariously intelligent *Seven Studies In*

Salesmanship, one precious moment triggered not just a gasp – but a full-on, mouth-wide-open, did-that-really-just-happen choke. Even more remarkably, it's a PowerPoint slide which stopped my laughter in mid-flow. So go to this show (you really *must* go to this show)... and see if you can guess which one.

Seven Studies is essentially a sketch show: a series of vignettes linked, occasionally tenuously, by the salesman's theme. So there's the "hard sell", which contained that pole-axing PowerPoint, and the "celebrity endorsement", which married finely-crafted throwaway barbs with a genuine critique of our vacuous media. The "relationship close" takes a much-discussed real-world issue to a rib-tickling extreme, while "damage limitation" dials down the gag count, yielding a funny but touching two-hander that's so *very* at home in Brighton.

Don't expect laugh-a-minute stuff, though; this is rather better than that. Each of the sketches is constructed as a proper piece of bonsai theatre, starting intriguingly, building slowly, and closing with an often-outrageous revelation. There are some serious themes too, and for much of the two hours, I was praying for just one of the stories to end on something meatier than a punchline. I'm pleased to say that Mitchell and Nixon granted my wish... though my goodness, they made me wait for it.

With all four of the cast delivering impressive performances, it feels wrong to single out anyone in particular. But it would be a travesty to ignore David Mounfield's appearance in *Coppelia*, the piece which illustrated the art of the "soft sell". As the eager and nervous innocent caught in a longed-for yet terrifying scenario, his demeanour was a joy, his expression the perfect match for what I was thinking. Still, that's just one example: I could equally talk about the cheery-but-vulnerable charity worker, the parodically well-rehearsed estate agent, the astronaut struggling to convey the concept of urgency to an over-solicitous sales rep.

As part of the cheap-and-cheerful £5 Fringe, this performance is packed into a room behind a pub – with co-writer Brian Mitchell also serving as tech guy, chief door-opener, and sometime stage-hand. I actually quite liked the homely nature of it all, and it's a good match of a high-energy show to what can be a rather noisy space. But I do wonder whether the direction paid enough heed to the lack of raked seating or raised stage. From my position halfway back, it turned into a radio play whenever the actors sat down... and they sat down more than they absolutely had to.

There were occasional lulls in the pace – not an unusual criticism, on a show's first night – but there's already a nice attention to detail, right down to the American salesman who's tried to impress his Scottish client by wearing a tartan tie. So there's self-evident five-star potential in *Seven Studies In Salesmanship*, once they've had a few performances to properly tune it, and either moved up to a better venue or adjusted to its current one. But don't wait till then; it's a delight as it stands. See it now.

(Since we published this review, we've learned that the director has made changes to the show to address the concern over sightlines.)

3) FringeReview

Seven Studies in Salesmanship

Venue: The Lord Nelson

Date: 19th May 2013

Reviewer: Paul Levy

The Lowdown

Two fine writers and four five actors lead us through seven comedy and tender drama perspectives on the buy-sell of the human condition.

The Review

In the capable writing hands of duo Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon here we have seven vignettes, essentially short playlets, and we begin in a call centre...

The comedy is sharp, harsh and well observed throughout and delivered with much skills by comedy actors Daniel Beales, David Mounfield, Heather Urquhart and Jen Rowe. Beales and Mounfield hail more from the world of live, radio and television sketch comedy. Urquhart and Rowe are mostly improvisers. It creates a vibrant alchemy of scripted actors on the edge and improvised actors delightfully chained to lines - there's an energy in the dialogue that really delivered. They play different characters in what could have been seven sketches, but what is, instead, seven short plays. It isn't easy to write short plays and, though some of these end with payoff, punchlines, they feel like well crafted and rounded pieces, and that is a sign of mature and self-aware writing.

Here we have, literally, seven angles on commerce, wry looks at the globalised, commercialised world we inhabit. There's a strong variety across the scenes and yet a common ground between them - the underlying selling and buying, the manipulative, transactional nature of the social human condition. The cast perform admirably, stepping between scenes and themes, characters and moods and they deliver some priceless moments, without over fussy design nor direction.

Mitchell and Nixon have founded strong punchiness overall, yet are able to deliver some delightful and often gentle dialogue. Some of it reminded me of early Kurt Vonnegut, and that is high praise indeed. The writers have created some very funny interplay built around seven archetypal scenarios, tinkering with the future and allowing a talented cast to step into the skins of characters that leap off the page. Even with a bit of noise pollution from the pub, the silences are commanding. Mitchell's direction allows the actors' comedy skills to come out but there's impressive serious acting here too. Dan Beales shows an ability to lay aside his comedy default and be a tender and in command serious actor as well.

Thus are we - the customer-audience-learners taken through seven "studies" rendered into much comedy and a bit of tender drama. Celebrity endorsement, hard sell, and damage limitation are just hints of the territory covered.

I wanted to see this lit better - the piece deserves it. And the venue didn't make viewing from the back easy. But the writing is fine - very fine indeed. The acting is fine - very fine indeed. And an Oscar to David Mounfield for Hard Sell, a bloody Oscar.

These are short playlets not sketches which is rare and the big virtue of this production. The last scene did feel like a sketch and I wanted an ending with the richer texture of the previous six.

I enjoyed the seven studies hugely and so did the audience. This is a highly recommended piece of comedy theatre.

The quote: "Seven studies in excellent writing and acting."

4) The Brighton Argus

Seven Studies In Salesmanship, The Lord Nelson, Brighton, until May 19

4:52pm Friday 17th May 2013 in The Critic By Tom Locke

For just £5 (the show is part of the £5 Fringe), Seven Studies In Salesmanship offers seven short, well-crafted plays by writers Brian Mitchell and Joseph Nixon.

Each play has a sales jargon tag as well as a title, such as Celebrity Endorsement and Captive Markets. They are all well observed and often hilarious examinations of human relationships, as seen through the prism of salesmanship, and each is very different from the one before.

There are simple, intimate situations as well as obvious sales scenarios, all containing the patter we know and hate.

The four actors – Dave Mounfield, Heather Urquhart, Daniel Beales and Jenny Rowe – play a variety of characters who show off their range of accents and ability to make a rudimentary set into a graveyard or a spaceship. Each gives an outstanding performance.

The final play, Big Data (tag “Relationship Close”), brings all four players together for a totally wicked and far-fetched selling concept that most estate agents will no doubt soon be practising.

There is a wide range of writing to enjoy and Brian Mitchell has directed the pieces in such a way as to reveal both the compassionate underbelly as well as the hard cynical skin of selling love, sex and fresh air.

5) Graham Duff - writer of BBC2's 'Ideal' and 'Hebburn'

Matching big laugh-out-loud gags with touching moments of genuine poignancy, 'Seven Studies in Salesmanship' is a beautifully crafted portmanteau production. Much more than just a satire of selling techniques, the show also grapples with narcissism, betrayal and obsession. From urban romantic entanglements to sci-fi vignettes and skewed Roald Dahl-esque morality tales, these stories frequently take unexpected twists and turns. Highly recommended.